

# 174th Field Artillery



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*Although they are not well known, self-propelled 155mm guns designated M12 played a specialized and highly successful role in the World War II defeat of Nazi Germany.*

*In the past two years, much information about the M12 has come to me from various sources. As a radio operator in Headquarters battery, I didn't often see our guns in action. What follows, therefore, is very interesting to me and perhaps will be to others whose duties didn't directly deal with the guns.*

*Bill Dunbar — June 2, 1997*

## Development of the M12

[Taken from *Sherman: a history of the American medium tank* © by Richard P. Hunnicutt, 2805 Bensons Way, Belmont, CA 94002 and used by permission from the author]

"The Ordnance Department commenced studies on a self-propelled 155 mm gun using the M3 tank chassis in June 1941. At that time, artillery doctrine envisaged the use of tractor towed guns and there was little interest in a self-propelled weapon. After discussion between Ordnance and the Artillery, an agreement was reached to construct a pilot vehicle. The 155mm gun M1918M1 with its recoil mechanism and top and bottom carriages was mounted on the M3 tank chassis. OCM 16912 approved this development and designated the new vehicle as the 155 mm gun motor carriage T6. The pilot was built at Rock Island Arsenal and delivered to Aberdeen Proving Ground on 12 February 1942.

"Firing tests showed the T6 to be a stable firing platform for the 155 mm gun. However, the hydraulically actuated spade was damaged and failed to retract after firing. Even in the retracted position, this protruding spade was a limiting factor to cross-country mobility and a redesign was required. It was also necessary to provide a suitable dust seal for the gun mount traversing mechanism.

"After modification, the T6 was shipped to Fort Bragg, North Carolina for service tests by the Field Artillery Board. These tests showed the superiority of the self-propelled mount in supporting rapidly moving formations. During one exercise, the T6 moved 6 miles to a new firing position in 35 minutes compared to about 3 hours for a towed gun. On 17 July, the Board recommended that the T6 be adopted after a few interior and stowage changes. They also requested that a similar companion vehicle be procured as a personnel and ammunition

carrier. The latter development was already in progress and was designated as the cargo carrier T14.

"OCM 18584 recommended standardization of the T6 as the 155mm gun motor carriage M12 and procurement was authorized for 50 vehicles. This was increased to 100 on 10 August 1942. The original T6 was shipped to Pressed Steel Car Company as a prototype and they completed the first production vehicle in September. Deliveries continued until March 1943 when the last five of the 100 M12s were received.

"The first production M12 was shipped to the Erie Proving Ground where stowage arrangements were worked out and approved by representatives of the Armored and Field Artillery Boards. It was then sent to Fort Bragg for additional tests. Modifications required on the production model included the correction of the old vapor lock problem inherent in the M3 tank and changes in the flame arrester and exhaust pipes.

"Headquarters, Army Ground Forces indicated that the 100 M12s available would meet all known requirements and the vehicles were either stored or assigned to training units.<sup>1</sup> The tests and training program revealed the need for further changes. With the buildup for Normandy invasion starting, plans were made in December, 1943 for the remanufacture and modernization of 74 M12s. A similar number of T14 cargo carriers, now standardized as the M30, also were to be rebuilt. The work began at the Baldwin Locomotive Works in February 1944 and was completed in May.

"Even with the many modifications, the production M12s retained the same general arrangement as the original T6. The 155mm gun was carried at the rear of the vehicle on the M4 pedestal mount. The weapon itself was the 155mm gun M1917, M1917A1, or M1918M1 depending upon availability. These guns used the same ammunition and differed only in minor details. They all dated from World War I and the M1917 was of French manufacture and still retained the original French breech ring. The M1918M1 was manufactured in the United States and when its breech ring was fitted to the M1917 gun, the latter was redesignated as the M1917A1.

"The M4 gun mount could be traversed 14 degrees to the right or left and its elevation ranged from +30 to -3 degrees. Ten 155mm projectiles were

<sup>1</sup> See the "Before the ETOF" paragraph

located on the carriage floor with 6 to the left of the gun mount and 4 to the right. Six propelling charges were stowed below the left rear seat. Two others were in wells in the lower carriage support and the remaining 2 were carried on the center of the rear floor compartment cover. Seats were provided for six men, with two in the driving compartment, two at the left side of the gun mount, and two on the spade when it was in the retracted position.

“To leave the rear of the tank chassis clear for the gun mount, the Continental R975 C1 engine was moved forward to just behind the driving compartment. The exhaust pipes extended out through each side of the vehicle between the center and rear bogies. Two fuel tanks with a combined capacity of 200 gallons were mounted horizontally in the sponsons, one on each side of the engine compartment. The hull was constructed of welded homogeneous armor plate with the sides 1/2 inch thick above the fenders and 3/4 inches below. The lower hull front consisted of the standard three piece differential and final drive housing.

“In action in Europe, the M12 fully justified the effort that went into its development. It was particularly effective in supporting the fast moving columns after the breakout from Normandy. On a number of occasions these self-propelled guns were the only heavy artillery within a days march of the front and they successfully performed all of the normal missions for such weapons.

“When the attacking armies came up against the heavy fortifications of the Siegfried Line in the Fall of 1944, the M12 proved to be an effective means for their destruction. Using direct fire at ranges of 1000 to 2000 yards, the 155mm shells were deadly to the pillboxes. With concrete piercing fuses, the high explosive rounds could penetrate up to 7 feet of concrete. Frequently, only one or two shots were required to cause the pillbox crew to surrender.”

Several excellent photos of M12s in action accompany Hunnicutt's text. One is identified as a 988th Battalion gun attacking a pillbox at Seelbach on March 18, 1945, but it is probably a 987th gun. Another picture shows a 4-gun battery near Budssheim on March 10th, firing in support of the 11th Armored Division. This was Battery C of the 174th, as per the battalion history.

### Before the ETO

A page in War Department FM 30 40, dated November, 1943 has drawings, photos and some specifications of the “155-mm Gun Motor Carriage, M12.” A note states: “This is a standard 155-mm gun mounted on an M3 medium tank chassis. This weapon was used in the latter part of the North African campaign and was instrumental in making the Germans vacate certain vital passes and, particularly, the city of Mateur. The gun was used in

the Sicilian campaign, and contributed greatly to the success of American troops there.” This contradicts Mr. Hunnicutt's statement that 100 “vehicles were either stored or assigned to training units.” Since 74 guns (72 to equip 6 battalions, plus 2 spares) were remanufactured and sent to the ETO, and at least one battalion is known to have operated in North Africa/Sicily/Italy, the other 26 could all have been sent to that theater — 24 guns in two battalions, plus 2 spares. This is conjecture, but in view of the seeming pairing of battalions sent to the ETO, may not be far off the mark.

### M12s on TV

Several television programs contain brief clips of Signal Corps footage showing M12s in action.

Two instances are in episodes of *Combat*. If memory serves, one of the stories is about an artillery officer whose father is a General and as a result is protected from dangerous assignments. He chafes under those restrictions but finally gets a chance to show his mettle when his unit is involved in a large-scale softening-up barrage. In a series of scenes that shifts rapidly from one battery to another, some M12s can be plainly seen.

Two TV documentaries, *A Fighter Pilot's Diary* and *Battlefield, part 6, The Battle for the Rhine*, both have clips of M12s. Toward the end of the *Diary* tape is the pilot's description of his detached service with an infantry division, coordinating air strikes in the Rhineland. He was headquartered in Liege, Belgium at the time and as he describes this part of his tour (and the buzz bombs), mobile rocket launchers are shown firing away. This is followed by a very short clip, taken from behind the gun, of an M12 — possibly the 174th — firing a round.

*Battlefield* has two sequences showing M12s in action but they seem to be other units; in one sequence the stars on the tanks have circles around them, whereas ours didn't, and the tank in the other sequence has what look like rudimentary fenders fore and aft over the tracks. Also, the gun doesn't look quite right and it may be a howitzer.

Another glimpse is in the *Victory at Sea* series, in the “Roman Renaissance” installment dealing with Naval operations in the Mediterranean. In footage of battles on the Anzio Beachhead, an M12 is seen firing a round (see the “Before the ETO” paragraph above).

The video series *The Road to Victory*, distributed by Publishers Choice Videos, includes a cassette called “Hot Pursuit” which chronicles the breakout from Normandy, the Brittany Peninsula campaign and the pursuit of Nazi forces into Germany. Both First and Third Army action is shown and includes good footage of an M12, with an M-30 ammunition carrier.

M12s in games

M12s figure in *Hitler's Last Gamble*, a board game about the Battle of the Bulge. I haven't seen this game so don't know if it includes a picture of an M12, but in the manual's description of the icons representing tanks and self-propelled artillery is the following:

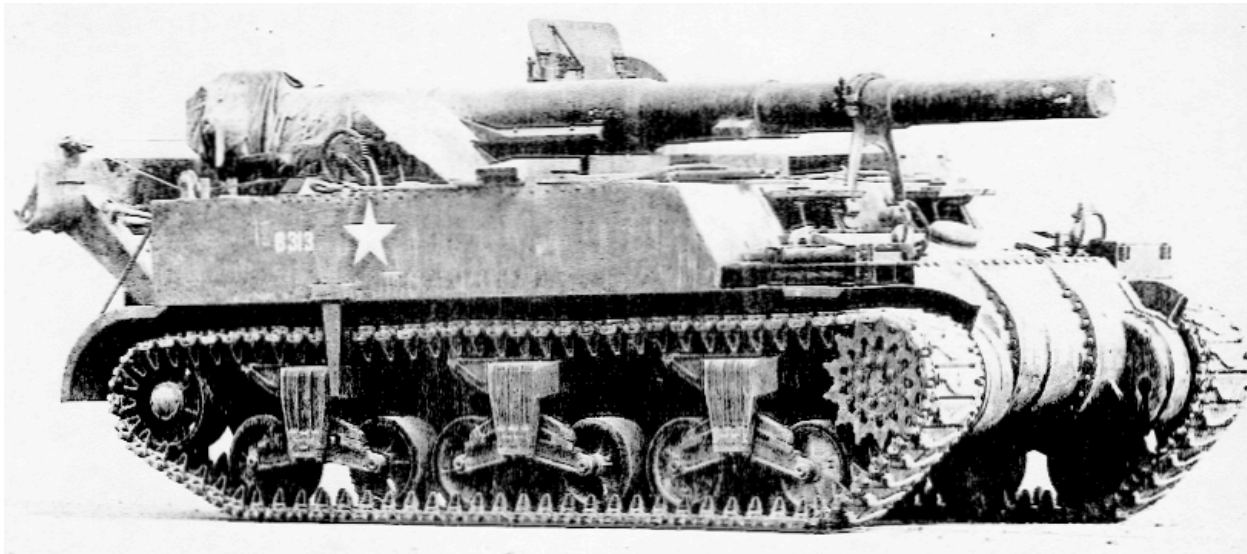
*M12 GMC:* This was an M1917 or M1918-type 155 mm gun on a much-modified M3 Medium Tank chassis, with a retractable spade at the rear to help absorb the gun's recoil. 100 were built and remained in the U.S. until 1944 when 74 were sent to Normandy between June and August with the nondivisional 174th, 258th, 557th, 558th, 987th and 991st Field Artillery Battalions (SP). They proved particularly valuable after the Normandy breakout by often being the only heavy artillery that could keep pace with the rapid advance across France while still being able to provide support at short notice. The M12 GMC was sometimes referred to as the "King Kong," and was used in batteries of four.

In the section dealing with units involved in the Bulge are these comments about the 6th Armored Division:

The "Super 6th" landed at Normandy on July 18th, 1944 and set several march records during the pursuit across France. In Brittany it averaged 25 miles per day over one two-week period. Later Combat Command A trapped 40,000 Germans in Brest...

174th vets vividly remember being an integral part of 6th Armored Division Combat Command B during its push through Brittany and siege of Brest, which the 557th also joined on Aug. 23rd. This action resulted in the American troops being dubbed "The Brassiere Boys" by the Army newspaper *Stars and Stripes*. since they contained Brest.

At least one M12 survives, at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland, among the "Mile of Tanks" displayed in the median of the road entering the facility.



## M12 Veteran's Groups

Information from the Internet has made possible a list of contacts for the six M12 battalions which served in the ETO. Perhaps the identity of the unit(s) that served in North Africa and Sicily can be found later. Here is the list, shown as the battalions seemed to have been paired:

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G. P. F. Veteran's Ass'n. (258th and 991st F.A. Bns)

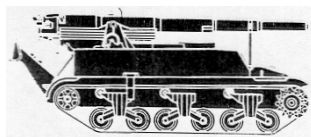
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558th FA Bn

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### **It Has Always Been The Soldier (Author Unknown)**

**It is the soldier, not the reporter,  
Who gives us freedom of the press.  
It is the soldier, not the poet,  
Who gives us freedom of speech.  
It is the soldier, not the campus orator,  
Who gives us freedom to demonstrate.  
It is the soldier who salutes the flag,  
Who serves under the flag,  
Whose coffin is draped with the flag,  
Who allows protesters to burn the flag.**